



Consumer Services Department

DIRECTOR'S OFFICE
140 WEST FLAGLER STREET
SUITE 903
MIAMI, FLORIDA 33130-1561

Tel: (305) 375-1250



Fax: (305) 375-4120



E-mail: consumer@miamidade.gov

CSD *News Release*

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CSD PLANS MEASURES TO CONTINUE PROTECTING CONSUMERS IF REGION HIT BY STORM THIS HURRICANE SEASON

In preparation for the 2002 Hurricane Season, which began last Saturday and runs until November 30, the Miami-Dade County Consumer Services Department (CSD) has put in place measures which will allow the Department to continue its work of protecting the rights of consumers, even if the region is hit by a major storm.

A critical element of CSD's disaster preparation is a survey of the prices of essential commodities. That survey, which was completed last month, has created a baseline from which Consumer Protection Enforcement Officers will investigate price-gouging complaints and prosecute offenders, if a State of Emergency is declared anytime this hurricane season.

Price controls are not normally permitted in the State of Florida. However, if a state of emergency is declared, both state law and Miami-Dade County ordinance prohibit price gouging.

These regulations ban retailers from charging exorbitant prices for essential goods or services following a state of emergency declaration by the Governor, the Mayor, the Board of County Commissioners, the County Manager, or the Director of the Miami-Dade Police Department.

In the event of such a declaration CSD Enforcement Officers will investigate price gouging complaints, comparing the prices being asked during the emergency, with what was charged prior to the declaration, as shown in the commodity prices survey.

The emergency regulations cover categories of commodities such as food, medicines, personal hygiene products, chemicals, petroleum products, lumber and household supplies. The regulations also cover the provision of services and the rental of any equipment, dwelling unit or self-storage facility likely to be in increased demand in a period when normal life has been disrupted by a natural disaster.

Some of the items whose average prices CSD enforcement officers documented during the survey were, food, ice, water, plywood, generators, flashlights, batteries, cleaning materials and pain relievers.

During an emergency price gouging complaints can be made to the CSD Consumer Hotline at (305) 375-3677, or to the Attorney General's Office at (800) 646-0444.

The Miami-Dade County ordinance against price gouging prescribes penalties ranging from a fine of \$500 to imprisonment of up to 60 days, or both.

[EDITORS: Please see attached CSD Commodities Price Survey]

Miami-Dade Consumer Advocate, Leonard Elias, cautions consumers that in the aftermath of a disaster, there are those who will attempt to prey upon them using home improvement scams, deceptive door-to-door sales, misleading solicitations and marketing scams.

He advises that consumers contemplating employing the services of a home improvement contractor call the Florida Department of Business and Professional Regulation (305-377-7115) or the Miami-Dade County Department of Building Code Compliance (305-375-2901) to determine whether the contractor is licensed.

Information as to whether there have been complaints in Miami-Dade County against a home improvement contractor, can be obtained through the CSD Consumer Hotline.

FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION PLEASE CONTACT:

Patrick Smikle, Public Information Officer, (305) 375-5745,

EMAIL: smiklep@miamidade.gov

Cathy Grimes Peel, CSD Deputy Director, (305) 375-4666, EMAIL: cpeel@miamidade.gov

Mario Goderich, Divisional Director of Consumer Protection (305) 375-4193

EMAIL: mg3836@miamidade.gov

Leonard Elias, Consumer Advocate, (305) 375-4199, EMAIL: le28@miamidade.gov

The Miami Dade Consumer Services Department is an agency of Miami-Dade County government that protects consumers through complaint mediation, business regulation, and consumer education. The Department operates the Consumer Hotline (305) 375-3677, a central telephone number for consumer complaints and information.